PERF Trending: A fascinating talk with Ottawa Police Chief Peter Sloly

Dear PERF member,

Like many of you, I've been watching the crazy situation in Ottawa all week. For the past two weeks, thousands of truckers have parked their rigs in Canada's capital city to protest the vaccine requirement for anyone crossing the Canada-U.S. border. The trucks are still parked in downtown Ottawa, and similar protests have popped up in other Canadian cities and at the border.

Ottawa Police Chief Peter Sloly has been a good friend to PERF for years, and he generously gave me 20 minutes yesterday so I could ask for his first-person account of what's going on. Before becoming chief in Ottawa in 2019, Peter was with the Toronto Police Service for 27 years, serving as deputy chief from 2009 to 2016. He has always been an expert on new and emerging issues in policing, including issues involving technology and social media.

Chuck Wexler: *Describe the situation you're facing.*

Chief Peter Sloly: When this truck convoy protest to our nation's capital was being informally announced, it was about a specific decision by the Canadian government to match President Biden's decision not to let truck drivers across the [Canada-U.S.] border without proof of vaccination. That was the trigger for the original convoy of trucks that left from our West Coast. These were truckers who had been impacted, or were sympathetic to those who had been impacted and could no longer cross the border between Canada and the U.S. without proof of vaccination.

Our two governments made that decision at about the same time. President Biden put the restriction in place in the U.S., and Prime Minister Trudeau followed up with his own restriction. That set off the trucking community. Their point of view was, "That's enough. We've been struggling. We've been keeping the economy going. We've been driving back and forth for long hours with great risk. Now we've got a restriction put in place by our government that's going to affect our jobs and disrespects our efforts." That's what started the convoy.

When it left the West Coast, it was only 20 or 30 trucks. As it rolled across the country, it generated more and more news, and by the time it arrived here in Ottawa, it had over 3,000 trucks!

It also had grown to include about 7,000 to 12,000 protesters, and a GoFundMe page that reached $11 million at its height. It became our largest truck convoy, our highest-funded demonstration, and one of our largest demonstrations in terms of the total number of participants.

But it really became problematic when countless other causes were attached on to the original issue of a vaccine requirement for truck drivers. It no longer was just "We don't like the vaccine policy." It became "We don't like the restriction on the opening of restaurants. We don't like the government requiring the children to be vaccinated. We don't want any government overreach. We don't like the government. We don't like the Prime Minister. We want to overthrow the government. We want to demand that the Governor-General of Canada, who is the Queen's representative, dissolve Parliament, end the Prime Minister's reign, and install another government in its place."

It got to that level of rhetoric before they ever arrived in Ottawa.

When they arrived, we also saw the far right and some of the far left mixing in. We see Confederate flags, Nazi swastikas, hate of all brands, from homophobia, to anti-Black, to anti-Jewish, to anti-Indigenous hate.

We have the jurisdiction in this city of a million people, with a police service of about 1,400 sworn officers and 600 to 700 civilian members. We have over 3,000 trucks, some of which have traveled from as far away as 3,000 kilometers. They've packed up their spouses and children to live in their trucks for days or weeks. They've left or lost their jobs. There's been in an increasing funnel of money, politics, ideology, and psychology.

And the idea was not to just drive around the capital, honk their horns, stay a couple nights, and then drive their families back home so the kids could get back to school. They say they're staying until the Prime Minister comes to negotiate an end to the vaccine policies, an end to the government's approach to the pandemic, and, in some more radical cases, an end to this government as a whole.

Wexler: *How did this get out of control?*

Chief Sloly: On Thursday, January 27, the first trucks started to arrive in town, and there were some local sympathizers who got in their trucks and SUVs and started driving around.

Friday, we started to see the real convoys start to come in, and we were able to park them outside the core downtown area. Everything was still manageable at that point.

But overnight and in the early morning hours of Saturday, we saw thousands of trucks coming in. It was a trickle Thursday night, maybe 100 or so on Friday, then the main group of 2,500 trucks came rolling in Friday night into Saturday morning from every direction. We had five bridges that filled up. They were on our two major highways coming in. They piled into the city and drove into our downtown core, where our Parliament buildings are.

Within minutes, they dropped their rigs, parked them, took their tires off in some cases, bled their brakes so they couldn't be towed out, chained themselves together, and created an occupation, instead of what we had been told would be a demonstration.

Wexler: *What impact have the truckers had on the day-to-day life of the city? Can people get around the city?*

Chief Sloly: The downtown business district has really been disabled. Our core area, with our major shopping malls, entertainment venues, and bars and restaurants, has been completely disrupted. There are only a few businesses open and able to operate. There's no tourism traffic, other than the hotels being filled by demonstrators. There's no other economic activity.

We have a lot of residential neighborhoods in and around that area. It's a deeply populated urban, residential area. They've been significantly impacted by noise, threats, assaultive behavior, harassment, and we've had one stabbing. It's highly aggravating, in-your-face, hateful activity. It's come down a lot from the first weekend, which was over the top. We've managed to get on top of the worst of that, but we haven't been able to eliminate it.

So we have 3 or 4 residential communities that have been deeply impacted and feel like they're under siege. The vast majority of city is not affected directly, but they're emotionally affected by what they see going on in their city.

We've had a lot of support, but not nearly enough to do anything except maintain our posture and not let it grow any further. We don't have enough resources to get these trucks out of here and end the core demonstration.

Wexler: *And the tow truck drivers are not willing to help? Is that because they're sympathetic with the truck drivers' cause?*

Chief Sloly: That's true in some cases. In more cases the issue is practical. The trucks represent a large portion of the clientele of the tow truck companies. These are their customers. The tow truck companies don't want to be involved in seizing the vehicles and the arrest and charging of these people, because tomorrow the truck drivers will be their customers again.

And in some cases the tow truck operators do want to work with us, but they're being threatened and doxxed if they offer any support to us.

Wexler: *Some are arguing you need to "crack down." What would cracking down look like?*

Chief Sloly: It's not an option. Roughly 25% of the trucks in what we're calling the "red zone" occupation areas have women and children living in there. So if you're sending in the riot squad and heavy tow trucks, you're going to be going into a place with vulnerable women and children who may be utilized as human shields. None of us could ever accept injuries to these people as a reasonable outcome for ending an unlawful demonstration. That's something I've never come up against.

I'm not giving up, but I don't have a lot of playbook options to call for this situation.

Wexler: *Is there anything our members can do to support you?*

Chief Sloly: We're getting a lot of support from U.S. national security agencies with investigations and intelligence-gathering. They were monitoring convoys, and at one point there was a large convoy coming out of the U.S. that diverted at the last minute. That type of intelligence-sharing is under way.

Sharing intelligence and lessons learned is what might be helpful for what we're dealing with here.

Wexler: *Social media has been a negative force-multiplier in this.*

Chief Sloly: Absolutely. A handful of people, with their sophisticated use of social media, can turn an idea into an ideology into a funded movement that can move thousands of vehicles and tens of thousands of individuals to a specific location across the second-largest country in the world. That couldn't happen 5 or 10 years ago, and police chiefs didn't have to worry about that happening. We have to worry about it now.

I'm grateful to Chief Sloly for sharing his insights with us in the midst of this crisis. I'll be glad to forward him any ideas and suggestions that PERF members would like to offer.

Thanks to Commissioner Cressida Dick

I want to thank Cressida Dick for her service on PERF's Board of Directors. As the first woman to lead the Metropolitan Police Service of London, Cressida led the Met through a terrorist attack on London Bridge, the COVID pandemic, and many other challenges, and I'm grateful that she always made herself available to PERF when we asked for assistance.

I have known Cressida for many years, and her resilience and fortitude have always been a key part of her character. She faced unprecedented challenges, and we will miss her strong voice at the Met.

Have a good weekend.

Best,

Chuck